

Testing the Taxonomies of European Politics: Conservatism, Nationalism, Populism, and the Challenges to Liberal Europe

KALMAN, Samuel and Sean Kennedy (eds.) – *The French Right between the Wars: Political and Intellectual Movements from Conservatism to Fascism*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2014. Pp. 274.

JONES, Larry Eugene (ed.) – *The German Right in the Weimar Republic: Studies in the History of German Conservatism, Nationalism, and Antisemitism*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2014. Pp. 332.

GOSEWINKEL, Dieter (ed.) – *Anti-liberal Europe: A Neglected Story of Europeanization*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2015. Pp. 200.

There's a captivating photograph in the collection of the Bildarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz of the chemist Otto Hahn and the physicist Lise Meitner in their lab at the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Chemistry in Berlin in 1913. Meitner looks on while Hahn records something with pen and paper. Behind them is a row of glass jars, neatly labelled. Many things are implicit in this image: the research partnership that would lead to the discovery of nuclear fission, Meitner's groundbreaking career and the belated recognition of her contributions to physics, as well as the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute itself, which sponsored their research, as it did the research at the Institute of Anthropology, Human Heredity and Eugenics, founded in 1927, which helped lay groundwork for some of the greatest horrors of the Nazi regime. But the bottles in the photo's background are equally captivating. Pristine, carefully ordered and labelled, they suggest the impetus at the heart of all research—the desire to identify, categorize, classify, and name in order to understand. This taxonomic impulse, to distil things down to their core characteristics, or 'essence,' and then relate them to each other by classifying them in groups, resonates in revealing ways in the three edited collections under review. In all three books certain political taxonomies—the right, fascism, and liberalism and its antitheses—form the point of departure, and all three volumes probe and challenge the categories that have structured historical analyses of European politics of the mid-twentieth century.

These three books appeared in 2014 and 2015 and share a further link with the 1913 photograph: they emerged on the eve of world events that would make their research deeply relevant—the photo on the eve of the Great War, during which Hahn was recruited to work on chemical weapons and Meitner in radiology, and the books just before the tumultuous year from June 2016 to May 2017 that saw

Brexit and the election of Donald Trump in the United States, as well the historic second round of the French elections, in which no traditional parties of the left or right were represented.

Each of these political events underscores the pressing need to understand the roots, causes, and various shades and constellations of populism, demagoguery, racism, xenophobia, misogyny, ultra-nationalism, isolationism, and conservatism that have launched a fresh assault on liberal democracy, the European project, and the international order. These are precisely the phenomena that Kalman and Kennedy, Jones, and Gosewinkel contour and deconstruct in the name of a more nuanced historical understanding of mid-twentieth-century Europe, but their work also offers valuable insights for the present. Indeed, in the current cultural and political climate of obfuscation and euphemism—of “alternative facts”—the kind of fine-grained work in these books and their emphasis on accuracy, clarity, subtlety, and nuance is now, more than ever, vital.

As their titles suggest, Samuel Kalman and Sean Kennedy’s *The French Right between the Wars*, Larry Eugene Jones’s *The German Right in the Weimar Republic*, and Dieter Gosewinkel’s *Anti-liberal Europe* all treat European politics in the tempestuous period between 1918 and 1945, though Gosewinkel’s scope extends well into the Cold War. Kalman and Kennedy and Jones’s books deal exclusively with the political right (albeit in its broadest conception), while Gosewinkel’s lens makes room for communism and other anti-parliamentary or anti-democratic movements. In addition to mapping out the taxonomic terrain, these three collections ask a set of common, and crucial, questions: How is prejudice mobilized? How is violence normalized? And how and why are people induced to rally to movements that work against their own rights and freedoms?

Kalman and Kennedy’s explicit goal in *The French Right between the Wars* is to move beyond the so-called immunity thesis and the debates it has inspired in the historiography of the French interwar period. As the authors write in their introduction, “much of the relevant literature has focused heavily, though not solely, on the question of how the various components of the interwar Right should be labeled, a matter which in turn has profound implications for characterizing their significance” (Kalman & Kennedy, p.6). Labelling elements of the interwar right as nationalist, conservative, reactionary, or Bonapartist—rather than fascist—has allowed certain scholars to portray France as immune to the fascist temptation. Others, however, challenged the view that fascism held limited appeal in France either by redefining fascism or by demonstrating the connections between fascist and other movements. As seminal as these debates have been, Kalman and Kennedy’s collection brings new perspectives and an openness to paradox to the study of right-wing politics in interwar France. Without simplifying or minimizing earlier historiography—which they deftly mapped out in their introduction—they nevertheless see fertile terrain beyond these debates, and as a result their book’s

essays dissect not only the politics and ideas of the period, but also lived realities in all their messiness.

Part I, about political movements, includes chapters on the psychology and anti-southern prejudices of the masses and how right-wing movements understood and mobilized these; the matrix of fascist, racist, and colonial violence in law enforcement in Algeria; ties between the French veterans' movement and the extreme right; and an analysis of how some members and leaders of the *Ligue des droits de l'homme* slid from pacifism to collaboration with Nazi Germany. Part II, *Gender and the Right*, works to "move beyond the standard depiction of masculine-dominated movements" (Kalman & Kennedy, p. 14) with articles that dismantle the idea of the right's narrow misogyny. The ways in which right-wing movements mobilized women reveal a nuanced picture of their simultaneous exaltation and subjugation, as well as the militancy of right-wing women themselves. Part III, *Intellectual and Cultural Trends*, corrects the tendency of historians of the French interwar right to overlook the cultural realm. Chapters dealing with the mobilization of mass cultural production, religious associational life, the conservative press, and physical culture reveal how effectively the political agendas of movements on the right turned various cultural forms into "weapons of ideological and rhetorical combat" (Kalman & Kennedy, p. 16). Part IV takes the form of an epilogue by Bill Irvine, which highlights the inadequacies of a binary lens of 'left' and 'right' for French politics and ideology in this period: "[A]t any given moment in the seventy years of the [Third] Republic," Irvine writes, "the above-listed taxonomy could do some considerable violence to political reality" (Kalman & Kennedy, p. 229).

Larry Eugene Jones's *The German Right in the Weimar Republic: Studies in the History of German Conservatism, Nationalism, and Antisemitism* makes a similar call for "a more nuanced and differentiated approach to the study of the German Right" (Jones, p. 2). His aim, however, "is not so much to challenge the new master narrative on the history of the German Right in the Weimar Republic as to underpin it with examples of some of the most recent scholarly work" (Jones, p. 2). That new master narrative emphasizes the disunity and fragmentation of right-wing movements in Weimar Germany and holds that "disunity of the Right was every bit as important as a prerequisite for the establishment of the Third Reich as the schism on the socialist Left or the fragmentation of the political middle" (Jones, 2). In emphasizing the fractiousness of a political milieu that was often defined more by disposition than by doctrine, the book's chapters aim to reassess the political and intellectual alignments and trajectories of the major figures and movements on the Weimar right.

As a result, it concentrates on intellectual biographies of political elites and the dynamics of party and league politics, but also considers the role of religion, anti-semitism, and nationalism in the rhetoric and practice of the German right. Chapters on Hindenburg, on Count Kuno von Westarp, and on Carl Schmitt are exemplars of recent scholarly interest in the study of elites. The Pan-German League is likewise the focus of three chapters that explore academics' role in defining the League's exclusionary vision of the German people and nation;

the League's post-1918 trajectory and ultimate eclipse by para-military combat leagues and the NSDAP (Nazi party); and the relationship between the League and the Nazi movement. A further three chapters investigate the nature and role of anti-semitism (particularly the opportunistic, situational variant) in the German National People's Party, the Combat Leagues, and the Catholic right, respectively.

In all these chapters, the question of taxonomy arises in various forms. A binary and adversarial worldview was fundamental to the German right, despite the multiplicity and heterogeneity of its movements. The conservative critic Carl Schmitt, whose influence is felt throughout the collection, "defined the friend-foe antagonism as the salient criterion of the political realm" (Jones, p. 39). But the issue of classification is also central to the chapters that reassess the intellectual and political alignment of right-wing elites and movements. The first chapter begins with the question, "How does one situate Hindenburg in the German Right?" The same question appears in other chapters about other elites, including Schmitt himself. It may appear that authors are simply moving Hindenburg or Schmitt from one jar to another, but as Wolfram Pyta argues, the answers to such questions transcend classification, as they help explain "the processes of political change that ran through the German Right" (Jones, p. 25).

One might wish, in a collection such as this, for an afterword or epilogue to tie the chapters together or perhaps point towards further research or other interpretive frameworks. Indeed, there is one additional chapter—on eugenics and Protestant social welfare—that offers one such new direction: how missionaries returning from former German colonies in East Africa viewed Weimar Germany, and how these perceptions further complicate our understanding of both German Protestant and colonial missionary perspectives on social welfare issues. Similarly, other scholarship on militant conservative women in Germany, most notably by Raffael Scheck, whose work Jones mentions, suggests other fruitful perspectives.¹ Contrary to a lament in the introduction that English-language scholars have switched focus from Weimar intellectual, diplomatic, and political history to fields such as cultural studies and gender studies, it seems to this reviewer that the latter's perspectives and methods could, in fact, greatly enhance the more nuanced understanding of the Weimar period that this book seeks.

Dieter Gosewinkel's *Anti-liberal Europe: A Neglected Story of Europeanization* tackles the issue of political taxonomies head on. Rather than the binary left/right divide, Gosewinkel proposes liberalism and anti-liberalism as an interpretive framework to help us make sense of twentieth-century Europeanization. Remarkably, however, the book opens by challenging the very conceptual validity of that idea (though not its scholarly or intellectual merit). Starting with the debate over definitions of 'liberal' and 'anti-liberal,' it then probes and dissects various "other" ideas of Europe. Gosewinkel's contention is that, from our perspective today, the European project, essentially integration, appears as a profoundly liberal one based in political, economic, and personal freedoms. These days, challenging Europe generally means leaving it. But Gosewinkel and his contributors

1 Raffael Scheck, *Mothers of the Nation: Right-Wing Women in Weimar Germany* (Oxford: Berg, 2004).

demonstrate that there have always been other, competing visions of Europe inspired by other, often anti-democratic, anti-capitalist, and anti-parliamentary, and therefore anti-liberal, ideas. These are the focus of the collection.

Part I, *Concepts*, deals with taxonomies—defining the intellectual terrain and its terms of reference. In the introduction, Gosewinkel emphasizes that “the abundant evidence of another strand of [European] development that deviates from the liberal tradition ... and even contradicts it” demands further analysis (Gosewinkel, p. 7). In response, the first chapter, by Michael Freeden, questions the notion of anti-liberalism when liberalism itself is such a diverse and elusive concept. Freeden cautions us against ideal types and astutely suggests testing these ideas on “the vague borderlines that occasion difficult judgments” (Gosewinkel, p. 42). Part II treats anti-liberalism as a feature of colonial and conservative concepts of Europe. From colonialism and the violence of decolonization as a barometer of Europe’s deep and abiding anti-liberalism, to projects such as ‘Abendland’ and ‘Europe of the Regions’ (which saw Europeanization through a hierarchical, Christian, organic reorganization of society as a solution to problems born of modernity, capitalism, and democracy) these chapters present alternate visions of Europe from without and within. Part III investigates the place of ‘ideas of Europe’ in the Nazi period and the German Democratic Republic. It addresses the Nazi ‘New European Order’ and Franco-German wartime collaboration as Europeanizing projects, as is the ‘Communist Europeanism’ of the East German state. An Afterword by Martin Conway probes the contours of liberal and anti-liberal conceptions of Europe. “The role of historians,” Conway writes, “is to subvert teleologies of integration focused on the present day by exploring both the historical genealogy of contemporary ideas of Europe, and by locating the process of European (re-)construction that occurred across the second half of the twentieth century within a much larger undergrowth of projects, ideologies and dreams that failed to happen, or simply failed” (Gosewinkel, p. 179).

It is perhaps a historical cliché to describe mid-twentieth-century Europe as a laboratory, a tumultuous place fostering experimentation and reaction, with simmering crises leading to explosive events. Cliché notwithstanding, the Hahn/Meitner laboratory came immediately to mind when I read these three collections, not least because of the tension between those pristine, orderly jars of distilled elements clearly labelled and the powerful, ugly, complicated nuclear age they would ultimately unleash. A similar tension is present in the scholarship we consider here: how can we historians simultaneously do justice to past realities by identifying and classifying ideas and movements with as much accuracy and clarity as we can, while still making room for the messy, unruly, unexpected ways in which they may defy or undermine our categories entirely?

By probing the taxonomies of European politics—whether to stress the complexity and heterogeneity of the European right or to propose moving away from the categories of left and right altogether, either by seeking a new framework

in the concepts of liberalism and anti-liberalism or by challenging the fundamental viability of those concepts—the scholarship here is alive with these tensions, and the result is research that is critical, reflexive, open, and engaged, principles that have taken on an added significance in our contemporary world.

In his most recent book, *The Latest Catastrophe: History, the Present, the Contemporary*, French historian Henry Rousso argues that it is the duty of historians “to restore a genealogy, ... to propose an order of intelligibility” to the study of contemporary events.² The collections under review here give us some tools and frameworks to do just that. Indeed, the media and political observers have been turning to historians of interwar and Second World War Europe in an effort to try to make sense of the events of this staggering year. Timothy Snyder and Robert Paxton, for example, have been solicited to weigh in on questions such as whether Donald Trump is a fascist, or whether the United States is headed towards totalitarianism.³ The question of what label to affix to Trumpism reflects the same tendency that has preoccupied scholars of the French and German right. The trajectories of conservative elites in Weimar Germany who appear united more by disposition than by political doctrine likewise resonate. The inadequacy of the concepts of left and right to explain political alignments is nowhere clearer than in the showdown between Emmanuel Macron’s *La République en Marche!* and Marine Le Pen’s *Front National*. Finally, the equation of Europe with liberalism, and not solely integration, perhaps helps to explain contemporary rejections of the European project and the very idea of Europe from numerous points on the political spectrum. “Europe,” Martin Conway writes, “was never quite as modern as it appeared to be” (Gosewinkel, p. 186). Perhaps it still isn’t, and perhaps neither is the United States.

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2 Henry Rousso, *The Latest Catastrophe: History, the Present, the Contemporary*. Trans. Jane Marie Todd. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), p. 156.

3 See Robert O. Paxton, “American Duce: Is Donald Trump a Fascist or a Plutocrat?” *Harper’s* (online), May 2017, and Chauncey DeVega, “Historian Timothy Snyder: ‘It’s pretty much inevitable’ that Trump will try to stage a coup and overthrow democracy,” *Salon*, May 1, 2017.